

SALT faces Senate test; arms to dominate debate

The military equation

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Washington—Agreement on a strategic arms limitation (SALT) treaty guarantees a national debate that will reach far beyond the terms of the pact itself and encompass all aspects of United States and Soviet military power.

The treaty puts ceilings on numbers of strategic nuclear missile launchers and bombers, the most dangerous instruments of war but the least likely to be used.

Debate in the Senate and elsewhere will center not only on whether the strategic nuclear terms are equitable and likely to foster better Soviet-American relations. It will bear down on the question of whether United States and allied conventional (non-nuclear) power is moving forward sufficiently to deter Soviet aggression at all levels.

In brief, the question must be answered whether the Soviet Union, having reached agreement on what is called nuclear parity, will be able to pursue its political and military goals by other means—by use or threat of use of its expanding conventional and closely related tactical nuclear arms.

There is no way that President Carter can isolate the SALT treaty from the broader military considerations, Senator Sam Nunn (D., Ga.) told a reporter yesterday. Mr. Nunn, one of the Senate's leading students of national security issues, has not committed himself on the SALT pact and his comments thus are closely watched on all sides.

Along with linkage of strategic nuclear questions with other aspects of the military power equation, the security debate

will center on the issues of equality and of verification, the latter referring to American ability to detect Soviet cheating.

Cyrus R. Vance, Secretary of State, and Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense, contended yesterday that the treaty, with its equal numerical ceilings, helps the U.S. to maintain "essential equivalence" with the Soviet Union and that the U.S. can verify Soviet compliance with treaty limitations.

Senator Henry M. Jackson (D., Wash.), a power in defense matters, sought to contradict them immediately with a claim that the pact is "substantially unequal and unverifiable." He will seek extensive changes in the treaty when it reaches the Senate.

By most assessments, the administration must do something rather soon about a new intercontinental missile to succeed the present Minuteman force, which is increasingly vulnerable to Soviet rockets. Such an undertaking, it is argued, is essential if parity is to be maintained with the Soviet Union and if there is to be hope of treaty ratification.

Mr. Brown had this in mind yesterday when he spoke of the new mobile missiles "we're considering." They would be "more survivable," he said, because the treaty puts a limit on the numbers of warheads to be carried by each of Russia's big SS-17, SS-18 and SS-19 intercontinental missiles.

The treaty limits each side to 2,250 missile launchers and bombers combined. Moscow would have to dismantle some of its older missiles and the U.S. apparently would have to discard some older B-52 bombers.

The Defense Department gives this comparison of U.S. and Soviet strategic forces as of January 1:

- Intercontinental missile launchers: U.S., 1,054; Soviet, 1,400.
- Submarine missile launchers: U.S., 656; Soviet, 950.
- Heavy bombers: U.S., 348; Soviet, 150.
- Bombers not in operation but countable under SALT: U.S., 224; Soviet, 0.
- Total launchers: U.S., 2,282; Soviet, 2,500.
- Total nuclear warheads: U.S., 9,200; Soviet, 5,000.

Treaty defenders argue that Soviet numerical leads are not the product of SALT pacts but of unilateral decisions taken over the years by each side.

In contending that the treaty produces inequalities, Mr. Jackson and those of like mind underscore the allowance to the Soviet Union of 308 heavy SS-18 missiles while the terms would bar more heavy missiles to the U.S.

There is no plan to produce such heavy missiles here at this time but the contention is that equal rights could become important at some future time. Other inequalities alleged are the omission of Soviet Backfire bombers from treaty limitations and the range limits imposed on cruise missiles that might be deployed in Europe with no corresponding limits on Soviet SS-20 missiles pointed at Western Europe.

If the administration can give persuasive answers to questions on equality and on across-the-board military power needs, Senator Nunn said, then the verification issue will take on major importance in the Senate. If it cannot give such answers, he said, "then verification becomes irrelevant."